

Article

## Interest Group Strategic Responses to Democratic Backsliding

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Submitted: 3 May 2022 | Accepted: 27 September 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

### Abstract

In this article, we offer insights into the plurality of interest groups' strategic responses to the socially, politically, and economically transformative phenomenon of democratic backsliding. For the purpose of the article, the term “ideational plurality” has been coined to refer to a plurality of interest groups' ideas leading their activities in general and their choice of strategies concerning the government in particular (attitudinal and behavioural aspects). Two policy fields and two types of interest groups engaged in an institutionalised social partnership—advocacy NGOs (operating in the environmental policy field) and economic groups (trade unions)—are studied comparatively in Slovenia using a mixed-methods approach. The key findings are that strategic responses to democratic backsliding vary between environmental NGOs and trade unions, as do their ideational plurality, and that environmental NGOs' ideational plurality damages their potential to struggle against democratic backsliding. In contrast, trade unions' ideational homogeneity enables them to jointly struggle against governmental destruction of one significant segment of democratic order (institutions of social partnership) without demanding that the government step down for misusing the Covid-19 pandemic to establish a system of governance that resonates with Viktor Orbán's ideas of illiberal democracy.

### Keywords

Covid-19; democratic backsliding; environment; interest group strategies; NGOs; Slovenia; social partnership; trade unions

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe” edited by Michael Dobbins (University of Konstanz) and Rafael Labanino (University of Konstanz).

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### 1. Introduction

In this article, we offer insights into the plurality of interest groups (IGs) strategic responses to the socially, politically, and economically transformative phenomenon of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Luhrmann et al., 2020). More precisely, the article further develops research on the “missing middle” in a post-socialist context (Dobbins & Riedel, 2021). We join research on IGs in post-socialist countries while taking into account the ongoing tendencies to democratic backsliding (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021; Riedel & Dobbins, 2021; Rozbicka et al., 2021).

The unique approach of our research is in looking at the contextual overlap of two system-wide “events” or “shocks” (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 1988): the Covid-19 pandemic and the sharp decline in democracy within a

particular country, namely Slovenia, where democratic backsliding swiftly evolved over a period of two years (April 2020–April 2022). This makes it relevant for both the study of IGs' responses to democratic backsliding and the development of knowledge on changes in IGs' strategies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Junk et al., 2022).

One of the contributions is related to the previous findings that advocacy groups tend to compete among themselves and, in the process, weaken their own position vis-à-vis the government (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). More precisely, our key finding is the revelation that IGs' ideational plurality is a factor which may diminish civil society's potential to struggle against democratic backsliding. For the purpose of this article, we define ideational plurality as a plurality of IGs' ideas leading their activities in general and their choice of

strategies concerning the government in particular (attitudinal and behavioural aspects).

As IGs' characteristics vary among policy fields, in our research, we take into account three factors of IGs' strategic responses. Firstly, we take the ideational plurality of the IGs found within a single policy field (Gough & Shackley, 2001, pp. 341–345; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010) as a separate factor. Ideational plurality in terms of an abundance of ideas that are often conflicting is especially characteristic of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS; Gough & Shackley, 2001; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010). ENGOS' various—more or less radical—ideational orientations contribute to the co-existence of ideational variations or even conflict within the same national milieu (see, e.g., Barter & Bebbington, 2012; Hultgren, 2018; Plehwe, 2022). In contrast, trade unions (TUs) share very similar ideas about defending workers' everyday experience of capitalism while not challenging the capitalist mode of production *per se*, domestically or internationally. More precisely, in the EU context, their aims and priorities lie with social capitalism, social dialogue, and workers' rights (Darlington, 2014).

Secondly, we consider the two contrasting positionings of IGs in relation to the government and other IGs—as expressed in two paradigms for studying IGs—pluralism and corporatism (Bianchi, 2001). Cause groups (including environmental groups) have been found to more intensively pursue indirect strategies of influence (Binderkrantz, 2005). TUs, as groups that are often involved in social partnerships, have a privileged position vis-à-vis decision-makers. This means that they primarily tend to pursue direct strategies of influence (Binderkrantz, 2005).

Thirdly, we build on previous findings that the predominant means of managing the Covid-19 pandemic has been an important factor in deepening the democratic backsliding already underway (Edgell et al., 2021; Guasti, 2020). Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only proven to be an important driver of change in lobbying access but has also been shown to affect economic and non-economic interests differently. Public IGs, which usually represent social, environmental, and similar causes, were not able to increase their access as much as business organisations, labour unions, or professional organisations (Junk et al., 2022).

Based on previous research, it is plausible to hypothesise that the ideational plurality within the same cluster of IGs (e.g., ENGOS) will impact their (various) perceptions of the relevance of democratic backsliding for fulfilling their (more or less radical) goals as well as their strategic adaptations to democratic backsliding. On the contrary, we expect ideationally more homogeneous IGs in a particular policy field (e.g., TUs) to interpret the relevance of democratic backsliding and adapt their strategies to it in a more homogeneous way. This is why they may potentially act as a cluster of collaborating actors pressuring the government to respect institutionalised social partnerships. Collaboration of ideationally hetero-

genic groups in relation to the government is more likely to make such clusters of groups weaker in resisting (particular elements of) democratic backsliding.

The article adds to the understanding of (a) IGs' perceptions of how democratic backsliding affects their access to policymakers, (b) how IGs adapt their strategies in a democratic backsliding setting, (c) how IGs' ideational plurality affects their strategic adaptation in the democratic backsliding setting, and (d) how the ideational plurality of IGs within a single policy field affects the weakening of their position vis-à-vis the government.

The case study of Slovenia is valuable for several reasons. Firstly, Slovenia has only experienced democratic backsliding tendencies in the context of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The situation was misused by the centre-right government (led by Janez Janša) to implement the Second Republic programme, which is similar to Orbán's illiberal ideas (e.g., empowerment of the executive, electoral rule change, abolition of certain state institutions, judicial reform; SDS, 2013).

Secondly, Slovenia's comparative closeness to Ireland, the UK, and the eastern part of Germany in terms of associational involvement (the share of citizens involved; see van Deth & Maloney, 2014) makes it an interesting case in general and also among post-socialist countries in particular.

Thirdly, the case study of Slovenia offers good opportunities for studying two contrasting policy fields: the environmental field, with pluralist characteristics (Novak, 2019), and the socio-economic field, with comparatively strong corporatist traditions (Avdagic, 2003; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Krašovec & Johannsen, 2017).

Fourthly, the context of Slovenia also offers a natural laboratory for a comparative study of two IG types: advocacy NGOs (those operating in the environmental policy field, i.e., ENGOS) and economic groups (TUs) engaged in an institutionalised social partnership.

We consider this research an explorative basis for further research. First, we present a theorisation of democratic backsliding and IGs, followed by a section on the mixed methodology used to gather data on and from IGs. We start the empirical analysis with an overview of the impact of the specific Slovenian context, which is characterised by the overlap of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding in the period 2020–2022, on the IG sphere. After analysis of empirical data gathered via interviews with the selected IGs, we comment on the findings in relation to the literature in the field.

## 2. Democratic Backsliding and Interest Groups

So far, research has shown that democratic backsliding involves the limiting of the political rights and freedoms of citizens (particularly the freedom of association and assembly), the restriction of the public space, and the shrinking of the civic space, as well as effects on the strength and the scope of IGs' political activities (Buyse,

2018; Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021; Toepler et al., 2020). Democratic backsliding has been associated with tendencies that produce the processual decomposing of a democratic system (Fink-Hafner, 2020; Guasti & Bustikova, 2017; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019), a decline in consultative politics, and political pressures on civil society actors—such as cutting their resources, legal restrictions, or their demonisation as foreign agents (Buyse, 2018; Toepler et al., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has been shown to be an important factor in deepening the democratic backsliding already underway (Edgell et al., 2021; Guasti, 2020); however, in the Slovenian case, the pandemic actually opened a window of opportunity for an intensive democratic backsliding in a short period (from taking over the government after the dissolution of the centre-left government in March 2020 to the April 2022 national elections). It has been shown that the overlap between democratic backsliding and managing the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in individual rights, including association and protest, damage to the interest intermediation by limiting the access of IGs to policy-making, as well as to attacks on IGs' resources, and hostile government speech against IGs (Junk et al., 2022; The Civicus Monitor, 2020a, 2022).

Our expectation that different IGs may be affected by democratic backsliding differently rests on several previous research findings. Firstly, different group types are associated with different statuses and behaviours (e.g., Dür & Mateo, 2013; Maloney et al., 1994). Secondly, in general, it is believed that cause groups (i.e., NGOs) tend to have bigger problems with resources compared to sectional IGs (i.e., economic groups). Thirdly, in general, the strategies of these groups tend to differ. Fourthly, as a rule, cause groups do not have access to decision-makers comparable to that of sectional IGs, although there are some exceptions (Dür, 2009). Fifthly, the strength of various IGs and their opportunity for political activity depend on the IG regime (neo-corporatist or pluralist) that dominates in a country once it starts to democratically backslide (Willems et al., 2021). This argument takes the following into account: (a) two contrasting paradigms of studying IGs, pluralist and corporatist (Bianchi, 2001), as well as (b) the ideational plurality of the IGs found within a single policy field (Gough & Shackley, 2001; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010).

However, IGs may not be just objects of democratic backsliding. For their active role, IGs' perceptions of their position and the choice of strategies vis-à-vis the government matter (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). In Poland, it appears that, despite cooperation, there is still a lot of competition between like-minded cause groups due to their competing for the same pool of members, donations, and subsidies (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). Contrarily, sectional groups were found to network even with groups that have conflicting interests. We use the example of Slovenia to demonstrate how democratic backsliding may affect both pluralist and neo-corporatist segments of govern-

ing. In addition, we also demonstrate that the ideational fragmentation of ENGOs makes networking among such organisations more difficult than networking among TUs.

### 3. Methodology

In line with the general hypothesis presented in the introduction, we expect that, in Slovenia, differences between IGs' perceptions of democratic backsliding and their strategic adaptations arise from ENGOs being ideationally heterogeneous and TUs being ideationally homogeneous. We used a mixed-methods approach to achieve the following detailed research aims:

1. Mapping the overlapping situation of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding in Slovenia (based on the existing research on Slovenia, reports from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, The Civicus Monitor, Eurofund, Freedom House, Transparency International, and the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia and information published by Slovenian public national radio and TV);
2. Mapping of IGs' (a) perceptions of democratic backsliding in the environmental and socio-economic fields, (b) strategic adaptations in the context of democratic backsliding (both based on interviews held with representatives of the participating IGs), and (c) ideational plurality within both groups of the studied IGs (based on interviews held with representatives of the participating IGs and on information published on IGs' official web-pages and Facebook pages).

#### 3.1. Selection of Interviewees and Data Collection

In order to identify relevant IGs for interviews, several approaches were used: (a) a review of the official data on the composition of the Economic and Social Council (TUs' membership in the formalised institution of social partnership) and the official information published by the Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning on ENGOs that it granted the status of ENGOs working in the public interest, in the environmental area; (b) a review of RTV online news articles including the information on IGs' activity; and (c) asking for information from the interviewees on the other IGs active in their field (snowball sampling).

We included several different types of IGs, ranging from well-organised ones with a number of employees to less organised ones that were based more on volunteer work; spatially, they had headquarters in the capital city of Ljubljana, a range of places in Slovenia, and even abroad (only in the case of ENGOs).

This way, 27 TUs and 32 ENGOs were identified; eight TUs (four being members of the Economic and Social Council and four active TU non-members of that council) and 15 ENGOs (those based in Ljubljana were more

responsive regardless of the size and level of internal organisation) accepted the invitation to the interview.

Between September 2020 and May 2022, interviews were conducted with the representatives chosen by the IGs; for the most part, they were the leading figures in the IG (presidents and general secretaries). The interviews were conducted based on a pre-prepared set of questions covering the following topics: questions about the IGs' main goals and activities; IGs' relations with other actors (political and non-political); the pressures with which they are dealing; their strategies; including the comparison of strategies used before and after the Covid-19 pandemic; IGs' attitudes towards the protests in Slovenia; and IGs' perceptions of the overall situation in Slovenia.

#### 4. Analysis

##### 4.1. *Democratic Backsliding in Slovenia and Its Overall Impact on Interest Groups*

In Slovenia, democratic backsliding started rather suddenly within a particular window of opportunity—a combination of the dissolution of the centre-left government and the start of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The democratic backsliding overlapped with the period of the Janša government (from taking over the government, following the dissolution of the centre-left government in March 2020, to the April 2022 national elections), and it has involved all the main aspects of democratic backsliding simultaneously. In 2021, a report on the state of democracy (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021) specified that Slovenia was among the most worrying examples of backsliding (joined by Brazil, India, the US, Hungary, and Poland; Boese et al., 2022).

Since its establishment, Janša's government exploited the Covid-19 crisis to diminish the interest intermediation process in general and, more specifically, to hinder the work of cause IGs in particular. For ENGOs, this process was reflected in one of the more prominent issues: the adoption of a law that made it more difficult for ENGOs to participate in institutionalised environmental policy-making (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a). ENGOs were targeted not only by limiting institutional opportunities for them to challenge construction projects based on environmental impact but also by funding cuts and being burdened with further barriers to their work (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a, pp. 8–9). These measures were not temporary. ENGOs faced significant funding challenges from the government, including in the adoption of the state budget for 2022, with projections for 2023 and 2024 (the parliament adopted it on December 8, 2021). No funds were allocated for environmental projects for 2022 or 2023. In addition, the climate fund for which ENGOs are eligible has been reduced by 70%. Therefore, ENGOs have not only strongly experienced the negative impact of the pandemic on the

relative openness of the political system but have also experienced resource constraints.

For economic groups (in addition to TUs, this includes representatives of the employers), this hindering of work was most prominently visible in the sudden exclusion of the Economic and Social Council from the governing process. The Economic and Social Council is somewhat unique to Slovenia in the Central-Eastern European setting (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Fink-Hafner, 2011), although it is an institutionalised social partnership organised in line with the International Labour Organisation model of tripartism (Economic and Social Council, 2022).

Contrary to several examples of active engagement of social partnership in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic in other countries (The Global Deal, 2020), the neo-corporatist arrangements in Slovenia ceased to function. The fast-track legislative procedures (an issue also found in Poland and Slovakia) and the political circumstances (the radical change in government) severely limited the involvement of social partners, which caused social partners' dissatisfaction (Eurofound, 2021, pp. 10–11, 24–31).

Slovenia also faced other issues that were indicators of democratic backsliding. The Constitutional Court of Slovenia ruled that the government's limitations to people's rights to association and movement during the pandemic were unconstitutional, as they had no basis in law (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021, 2022). Such restrictions by the government resulted in the general civic space rating in Slovenia being downgraded from "open" to "narrowed," meaning that democratic freedoms, such as the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, had been increasingly violated (The Civicus Monitor, 2022a, 2020b). The government pressure on the civic space (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a) and the decline in civil liberties that was clearly detected also included NGOs' freedoms, while TUs and similar professional or labour organisations were estimated to have retained full freedom (Freedom House, 2022); however, they lost their position as partners to the government. It is also important to note that, in 2021, Slovenia's corruption perception index score was the worst since 2013 (Transparency International Slovenia, 2022).

##### 4.2. *Interest Groups' Perceptions of Democratic Backsliding*

In order to understand changes in IGs' strategies, it is important to understand how IGs reflected on the contextual change and circumstances of the diminishing opportunities for using the strategies they had used before the period of the Janša's government and the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, the interviewed IGs explicitly pointed out the overlapping of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding. Secondly, the prevalent perception of those interviewed was that political pressure during that time increased significantly.

Interviewed ENGOs reported political pressure from repressive institutions, from particular ministers, and via adopted laws, which diminished their rights and access to the governing process. One of the interviewees described the changes in laws as “barbaric” (anonymous interviewee 4, November 11, 2020). A number of those interviewed also mentioned ENGOs’ being discredited by various media sources close to the government and social media pressure in the form of hostile comments and claims, discrediting, and generally unpleasant content. Despite feeling the political pressure, less than half of the interviewed ENGOs evaluated their relationships with state actors as negative; however, almost half noticed that their relations with state actors had been changing lately. One of them pointed out that the politics of the governing party were “less inclined to cooperation” (anonymous interviewee 6, October 16, 2020). Only a couple of the interviewees assessed their relationship with state actors as positive (ENGOs, which combine taking care of nature and managing particular animal species in Slovenia in collaboration with the state).

In addition to political pressures, the interviewees also talked about social pressures. They recognised them as (a) demands from the public that ENGOs act upon a particular issue, while they often do not have the resources and staff to do so; (b) general hostility towards environmental civil society; (c) pressures related to the pandemic; (d) anonymous messages; (e) occasional pressures from economic actors; (f) disrespect of agreements; (g) loss of resources; and (h) pressures related to lawsuits coming from legal offices.

TUs, first of all, criticised Janša’s government for terminating social dialogue in the Economic and Social Council. The interviewees did not see the absence of cooperation with the government during this time as being caused by the pandemic but rather as a result of the government’s misuse of the pandemic circumstances to achieve particular political goals. One of the interviewees clearly summarised the overall evaluation by stating that “the democratic deficit in decision-making has radically deepened with the arrival of the new government” (anonymous interviewee 17, April 13, 2022). Furthermore, criticism of the government coming from TUs was—as reported by the interviewees—very badly received. TUs were accused of “being a political party” or “being subordinate to a political party.” The interviewees did not see these kinds of pressures as the usual political pressures on TUs but rather as extraordinary ones. What stood out was the fact that pressures were coming from the governing parties, mostly through social media (Twitter) and mass media that were known to be close to the leading party’s ideology. Such media posts did not shy away from attacking TU representatives and even individual TU members.

TUs also mentioned a variety of other types of pressure on them, including the misinterpretation of information and fake news, especially regarding the salaries of TU leaders, verbal threats, attempts to gain control

over TUs by various institutions, work-related legal sanctions, and one-sided decisions in the field of collective agreements. There were also attempts to directly prevent TU activities, obstruction of TUs leaders’ activities, threats of dismissal toward TU leaders (in the case of TUs representing state employees), and even an attempt to prohibit the activities of a TU. Several interviewees used the term “government’s revanchism” to describe its reactions to the TUs’ public exposure of the government’s wrongdoings and joining particular protests. In some cases, political pressure also came from local governments, which one interviewee described as “never seen before” (anonymous interviewee 22, April 25, 2022). It is not surprising that the interviewees nearly unanimously evaluated TU relations with state actors as negative. Interestingly, only a couple of TUs representatives stood out by stressing “the pressures coming from the capital in general” and from “capital owners in particular” or “pressures coming from partly from the public and partly from other TUs.”

When it comes to IGs’ resources, as a rule, dependence on government funding makes some (but not the overall cluster of) cause groups (ENGOs) more vulnerable than sectional ones (TUs). ENGOs’ reported reasons for a worsening trend in the financial situation included the pandemic, which limited some of the usual activities that used to bring them income. In contrast, TUs are financially autonomous due to membership fees, and none of them disclosed a worsening financial situation related either to democratic backsliding or the health crisis.

#### *4.3. Adaptation of Interest Groups’ Strategies*

Despite the fact that all of the interviewees from the ENGOs estimated that the pandemic had not affected their working priorities, a majority confirmed that their strategies had changed in some ways during the overlap of the pandemic and the democratic backsliding. The explanation was that before the pandemic, they had predominantly combined insider lobbying strategies (when attempting to influence public policies) and various approaches with the goal of consciousness-raising, educating and informing the public regarding environmental issues. Indeed, even before the pandemic, outsider lobbying strategies had been predominantly, but not solely, used by ENGOs that had less access to decision-makers and did not have open channels of communication with them. The most notable change, however, was diminished success in some ENGOs’ direct lobbying due to the worsening of relations with the relevant ministries.

Nevertheless, the pandemic also affected ENGOs’ activities, bringing about two changes. Firstly, it encouraged ENGOs to increase their use of technology (e.g., their social media, Zoom, etc.). Increased working from home resulted in higher usage of technology for communication. Secondly, about half of the interviewees pointed out that the pandemic had also affected their



day-to-day activities, resulting in them organising fewer events and having fewer projects on which to work.

TUs, in contrast, rather consistently confirmed changes in strategies during the studied period despite sticking to the same leading ideas for their day-to-day work and their regular securing of help for union members in need. The shift from the social dialogue as a form of insider lobbying to using outsider lobbying strategies being the priority occurred because governments cancelled the social dialogue—TUs were turning more directly towards the public. They reported that they had organised more press conferences, written public letters, published opinions in mass media, appeared in public discussion events, collected signatures for petitions, and selectively participated in public protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, they also used judicial institutional possibilities (mostly constitutional evaluation) in connection with the laws that Janša’s government had adopted during the pandemic.

The pandemic influenced TU work in two main ways. Firstly, they started to increase their use of various tech-

nologies, especially for communication, due to a shift to working from home. Secondly, the pandemic also led to TUs somewhat changing their work priorities in terms of shifting from their previous primary focus on solving systemic problems to focusing on reacting to the emergency policy interventions related to the pandemic.

It is also important to note that IGs generally showed technological adaptation of their internal organisational strategies; two big IGs also pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed internal conflicts and issues of internal democracy related to ideological differences among members (e.g., regarding vaccination and rights related to this issue) and the recognition of the need for leadership to work more with its members.

As shown in Table 1, there are similarities and differences in ENGO and TU strategies used in the context of the overlap of democratic backsliding and the pandemic.

TUs changed their strategies regarding communication with the government and work priorities more prominently than ENGOs. A shift towards greater use of outsider lobbying strategies stands out, particularly

**Table 1.** Changes in IGs’ strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding as reported by interviewees from TUs and ENGOs.

		TUs	ENGOs
Insider strategies	<i>Institutional access</i>	Pressuring the government to restore the social dialogue	Attempts to keep or (re)gain influence in relation to the relevant ministries
	<i>Public policies</i>	Attempts to influence decision-making on pandemic laws relevant for employees using various means, including judiciary (the Constitutional Court); temporary shift of attention from major systemic issues to ongoing policy-making	Attempts to influence decision-making on pandemic laws, which included relevant issues for ENGOs
Outsider strategies	<i>Their use, in general</i>	Major shift from insider lobbying strategies towards more outsider lobbying strategies	A variety of strategic adaptations depending on the (various) ENGO’s relations with the relevant ministries
	<i>Information</i>	Increase in communication with the public, aiming to inform and put pressure on the government by using press conferences, public letters, and publications on their own web pages	Communicating with the public, aiming at consciousness-raising, educating, and informing, mostly by using new technologies
	<i>Protests</i>	Major shift in favour of the use of protest	A variety of ENGOs’ attitudes and behaviours
Internal organisational strategies	<i>Technological innovation</i>	Major increase in using new technologies for internal organisational maintenance and adaptation	Major increase in using technologies for internal organisational maintenance and adaptation
	<i>Continuity of internal activities</i>	Doing day-to-day activities uninterrupted	Doing day-to-day activities uninterrupted

in the case of TUs as opposed to ENGOs. The main reason for these differences is that TUs had regularly participated in the formally organised social dialogue before the start of Janša's government. In contrast, ENGOs as a cluster of IGs had never had a formal institution comparable to the Economic and Social Council. Even ENGOs with access to the government had always predominantly depended on the responsiveness of a particular ministry. Contrarily, both clusters of IGs shifted toward more intensive use of technology for their activities.

#### *4.4. Ideational Plurality and Interest Groups' Choice of Strategies*

The thesis that ENGOs tend to be ideationally heterogeneous was confirmed by their international connections and by the interviewees' responses. Different ideational groupings are visible in ENGOs' linkages with transnational groups and networks, which constitute the more ambitious global mainstream (e.g., Climate Action Network, Friends of the Earth) and the more moderate global mainstream group (e.g., BirdLife International, European Federation for Transport and Environment). The more ambitious global mainstream includes a number of well-established transnational ENGOs and networks that have radical ideas, especially regarding electricity generation (e.g., opposition to nuclear energy generation). In contrast, the moderate global mainstream is less radical regarding specific policies and generally advocates nature conservation. Indeed, several of the interviewees from ENGOs clearly stated that they belong to different ideational groupings. They differed so much that these differences, in some cases, even led to mutual conflicts (in the interview characterised as mild). Some interviewees pointed out that there was a group of ENGOs that were better positioned vis-à-vis the government, which—in addition to having more influence—allowed them to get more funding. Ideationally, heterogeneity among the analysed ENGOs was visible in differing general goals, policy goals, and even in ENGOs' attitudes toward the political system. Some interviewees saw Slovenia's political system as a good system within which they could achieve their goals; others believed it needed to be significantly changed. Several ENGOs stood out with demands that the predominant social values and the capitalist economic and political systems need to be radically changed to achieve environmental goals.

Among TUs, however, there was a lot less ideational plurality compared to ENGOs. Slovenia's TUs are internationally integrated into various TU associations, which share ideas of social dialogue and workers' rights. This homogeneity is also present in Slovenia's domestic milieu, where they all favour institutionalised consultative politics in general and the Economic and Social Council in particular, and mostly just desire better implementation of existing policies as opposed to radical policy change. The ideational homogeneity of TUs functions

as a counterweight to numerous political accusations of being an extension of certain political parties.

Regarding views of the political system, the interviewees agreed that the system is good as it is, and many of them pointed out TUs' apolitical stance towards politics in general. Also, TUs did not focus on democratic backsliding per se, but rather on representing their members' interests. One of the interviewees clearly stressed the need to amend Slovenia's constitution in order to diminish the opportunities for political involvement in the work of the repressive state apparatus (anonymous interviewee 18, May 3, 2022).

Despite ideational homogeneity and the prevailing collaboration among TUs, disagreements among them might occur (as noted by one of the interviewees (anonymous interviewee 22, April 25, 2022) because they, in fact, represent the interests of various groups of the employed. The interviewee explained that when TUs do get into a conflict among themselves, it is due to conflicting particularistic economic interests.

An interesting indicator of differences in ideational homogeneity among ENGOs and TUs is the attitudes toward the protests in Slovenia at the beginning of 2020 ("Tukaj smo, ker ste prelomili svojo obljubo," 2020). These protests were mostly organised against the new (Janša's) government. In the context of backsliding, IGs' attitudes and actions gained special importance, particularly their relations to protests.

ENGOs' attitudes towards the protests varied a lot. A few interviewees said their ENGO did not support the protests at all because "we did not understand these protests as being about nature and climate justice." Some expressed strong support for the protests, while others only supported segments of protests related to issues concerning nature. For example, an environmental protest with the slogan "Hands off Nature" was organised in reaction to the new law on nature conservation, which included stricter criteria for ENGOs' inclusion in decision-making procedures (Daugul, 2020a). ENGOs also protested against the adoption of the third anti-pandemic law in front of the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (Daugul, 2020b). Many of the interviewed ENGOs expressed mixed feelings about the protests; despite supporting the protest message, they did not see protests as "constructive" but rather as "having too much of a political undertone." Some of the interviewees also questioned the effectiveness of protests.

Contrarily, the interviewed TUs were more homogeneously supportive of the protests. All but one of the interviewees (the one who had pressured the government to grant the professions it represented a special status concerning the public sector salary system) clearly supported a segment of protests related to interests represented by TUs. However, while their TUs decided to participate in the wave of protests exposing particular TUs' interests and demands (they joined the civil society initiative the Voice of the People), they did not demand that Janša's government step down.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research findings suggest that both clusters of IGs were affected by democratic backsliding, which, in the case of Slovenia, overlapped with the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, IGs' perceptions of democratic backsliding varied, and we believe they need to be considered as a factor in IGs' reactions to democratic backsliding. TUs generally noticed democratic backsliding as a pressing issue, while the level of concern varied among ENGOs. Similarly, TUs were all aware of the reduction in institutional venues for their involvement in political decision-making processes, while the cluster of ENGOs was not.

Under Janša's government, sectional IGs (TUs) have not proven to be more integrated into political processes than cause ones (ENGOs). Indeed, the Slovenian example questions not only the openness of decision-makers to pluralist IG activities but also the stability of neo-corporatist arrangements in general and the accessibility of policymakers for TUs as sectional (economic) IGs in particular. This contrasts with findings on TUs regaining access in other countries dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (Junk et al., 2022) while also raising the question of how to measure changes in access and the impact on government decision-making.

As both clusters of IGs recognised the idiosyncratic political and health circumstances in various ways and were more or less affected by them, their strategic responses to them also differed. While ENGOs adapted their work strategies only slightly and more or less still used the same strategies as before the democratic backsliding had started, TUs radically shifted towards outsider lobbying strategies by significantly expanding their communication with the public and turning to protests (usually reserved for extraordinary situations). Such differences did not come as a surprise when we consider that ENGOs had never had institutionalised access to the government comparable to that of TUs'. These research findings somewhat refine the argument from the literature that cause groups are more likely to go public with their activities, while sectional groups are more likely to rely on advocacy.

Our research findings favour the expectation that different strategic responses to democratic backsliding resonate with the differences in IGs' ideational plurality. We found this not only between the two clusters of IGs but also within the cluster of ENGOs. TUs tend to stick to the idea of struggling for their members' socio-economic and professional benefits within the existing economic and political system. As ENGOs differ in attitudes towards the economic and political system and their strategic approaches, it is no surprise that there is less cooperation and more conflict among ENGOs compared to TUs. When conflicts among TUs appear, they are considered to be consequences of the particularistic economic interests of TUs and not the consequence of disagreements about the basic ideational foundations of TU politics.

Overall, TUs' homogeneity in their ideational sense and actions contributes to maximising their strength in relation to the government. In contrast, ENGOs' heterogeneity and mutual conflict can only damage the strength of ENGOs as a specific cluster of IGs in relation to the government. This may be relevant for answering general questions on the role of IGs in stopping/reversing democratic backsliding.

Our findings resonate a great deal with research by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021), but they also differ from the works of both Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) and Willems et al. (2021) in their estimation of the endurance of sectional groups' better integration into political processes than cause groups. In Slovenia, sectional groups (TUs), in fact, lost access to the government. Organisational resources did not appear to matter with regard to Janša's government, which was more or less open to particular IGs. It does not, then, come as a surprise that in the context of democratic backsliding in Slovenia, both IG clusters used outside strategies related to the public and some also participated in protests. Nevertheless, even in using outside strategies, TUs primarily followed their traditional interests and goals. They did not demand a change of government or any significant changes to the political system, while several segments of the ENGOs favoured radical social, economic, and political changes.

The Polish experience (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021), being a crowded environment where organisations may avoid alliances with other groups to enhance their reputations and to distinguish themselves from others who represent similar interests, does not resonate well with the Slovenian case. In Slovenia, a lack of alliances among ENGOs appears rather to be primarily based on their ideational fragmentation. It also may be hypothesised that less radical ENGOs are more ideationally acceptable for the government and may be treated differently in terms of access and financing for that reason. This resonates with findings by Horváthová and Dobbins (2019).

The findings from Slovenia contradict several findings by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) in the context of democratic backsliding: (a) IGs are further weakened and made more vulnerable vis-à-vis the government (we found important differences between ENGOs and TUs in this regard), (b) democratic backsliding further strengthens the neo-corporatist model and weakens the pluralist one (in Slovenia both were weakened), and (c) advocacy groups might not diminish in number, but the plurality might be further diminished (in Slovenia, the plurality of ENGOs has not diminished but rather strengthened).

Compared to Hungary, where only one dominant party appeared to critically matter for IG politics (Czarnecki & Piotrowska, 2021), Slovenia's experience with only two years of democratic backsliding under the coalition government had not led to IGs noticing the comparable circumstances. However, our research does point to the closing of governmental decision-making



for consultative politics as part of the changing macro characteristics of governing. As in the case of Hungary (Transparency International Hungary, 2014), it has been shown that the government has been increasingly linked primarily to companies that are selected based on political criteria to join the inner circle of close allies of the governing political elite and to create distinctive IG-governing party relations as part of state capture and crony capitalism (Martin & Ligeti, 2017). Additional comparable research in Slovenia and other countries would need to include business–governing party relations and relations between IGs and parties more broadly.

All in all, the overlap of democratic backsliding and the pandemic also revealed both the importance of context (Lisi & Loureiro, 2022) and that of internal organisational strategies, both of which were also noted by the interviewees from large, complex IGs. Here, a difference between the democratic backsliding and the pandemic was seen as a difference between the change in governance (including the misuse of some policies declared to be anti-Covid-19 measures in favour of Janša's party programme of the second republic) and a health crisis measures to contain the spread of Covid-19.

To conclude, our findings call for further research involving broader international comparisons in the following fields: (a) the impact of IGs' ideational plurality, IGs' resources, and the internationally backed strength of national civil society on stopping and reversing the democratic backsliding within a particular country; and (b) answering the question concerning whether/how collective actions contribute to combating the effects of the pandemic (as previously noted by Hattke & Martin, 2020) and democratic backsliding.

### Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Slovenian Research Agency Grant No. P5–0136.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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